

THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE  
FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION  
420 WEST 118th STREET  
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David A. Lowe

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## THE BOOK BUSINESS IN POSTCOMMUNISTS RUSSIA: MOSCOW, YEAR ONE (1992)

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Public discussion of Russian life in 1992 drew exhaustively on the rhetoric of crisis. The situation in the book world led several distinguished representatives of the intelligentsia to declare "The Book is in Danger!"<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the several million people who rode Moscow's subway on any given day saw a thriving book trade in and around stations. Why then cries of alarm? In the following pages I will try to answer that question by summarizing the conditions, factors, and events that shaped editors', publishers', distributors' and buyers' decisions in the first year following the collapse of the USSR.<sup>2</sup>

Market forces and relations solidified in publishing earlier and to greater effect than in any other area of the Russian economy. In the years 1987-88, in the fullest flush of perestroika, Soviet book publishing had already taken a sharp turn in the direc-

tion of a market distinctly more capitalist than socialist. When Yeltsin's government lifted most price controls in January 1992, the making and selling of books acquired more of a business complexion than ever before.<sup>3</sup> Yet the Russian book market remained a striking hybrid, in part still in the grips of state monopolies and policies, in part as wild, woolly, and wide open as the mythical American West.

The most important monopolies comprised paper and book production. As in the recent Soviet past, paper still caused publishers headaches, but now because of its high cost rather than because of any shortages.<sup>4</sup> As for typographical services, in the opinion of all the publishers I interviewed, the fees that printers imposed bore little or no relation to real costs, reflecting instead either caprice or greed. In any case, printing costs in Russia as a proportion of the retail price for a book greatly exceeded those

- 1 "Kniga v opasnosti", *Knizhnoe obzrenie*, no. 39 (1992): 2. Signed by Dmitry Likhachev, Leonid Leonov, and two other members of the Academy of Sciences, this document petitioned the governments of the CIS to intervene on behalf of "socially meaningful" literature. In the worst of Soviet Russian traditions, the appeal contrived to suggest that any other sort of literature was dangerous: "the book market has been flooded with publications of quite dubious moral value . . . the effect . . . will be pernicious."
- 2 The present article draws on research conducted in Moscow in the latter half of 1992. An IREX grant, a leave of absence from Vanderbilt University, and the hospitality of the Gorky Institute of World Literature made my stay and work in Moscow possible.
- 3 Various new books and periodicals for 1992 testified to the fact that book publishing in Russia had acquired the status of a *business*. Among them were the periodicals *Izdatel'kommersant* (monthly, published by VlaS, St. Petersburg) and *Knizhnoe delo* (quarterly, published by Progress, Moscow) and the reference guide *Katalog uslug avtora, izdateli, knigoprodatsu* (Moscow: Inter-Ves, 1992). At least two banks—Izdat-bank (Moscow) and Kommerchesky bank sotsial'nogo razvitiya (Izhevsk)—specialized in financing the book business.
- 4 In the recent past the shortage of inexpensive paper had allowed for political manipulation. See Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, "Famine in Time of Feast: Soviet Literary Publishing under *Glasnost*," *The Harriman Institute Forum*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1990): 24.



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in other countries, sometimes reaching 40-60%.<sup>5</sup> Printing equipment, 90% of it far below contemporary world standards,<sup>6</sup> proved ill-suited for runs of under 30,000 copies. In fact, in 1992 publishers found it nearly impossible to contract for modest printings.

In the areas of publishing and distribution, demonopolization and/or privatization made headway in 1992, resulting in withering competition for state structures. As of late in the year the Russian Ministry of Print had registered some 4300 publishing entities, more than half of them representing private or so-called mixed capital.<sup>7</sup> Non-state publishers included such organizations as joint ventures (with a foreign partner), small businesses (*malye predpriyatiya*), cooperatives, stock companies, and limited companies. In some cases the distinction between state publishers and alternative presses blurred, as when small private publishing ventures contracted with large state houses for joint publications, a practice very much on the rise. As for distribution, exchanges (*birzhi*), fairs (*yarmarki*), and markets (*rynki*) complemented and supplemented a wide variety of alternatives to the state-run agencies *Soyuzkniga*, *Roskniga*, and *Mezhkniga*.<sup>8</sup>

The economic reforms of 1992 accelerated the metamorphosis of book publishing from a branch of Soviet industry with favored slave status to a business cast to the maws of ruthless capitalist sharks. Economics, rather than ideology or connections, now accounted for virtually everything. The price hikes of 1992 hit book production and distribution with brutal force, prices and costs rising throughout the year at an annual rate of around 2000%.<sup>9</sup>

In the face of daunting economic circumstances, almost everyone in the publishing business argued for government intervention in support of the industry. Typical was a January 1992 document that the Association of Book Publishers of Independent

States addressed to the CIS governments. The publishers—almost all of them large state houses—asked for tax breaks for those publishers and printers who produced literature “of social significance.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the year the government consistently failed to respond to publishers’ pleas, choosing instead to treat books like most other commodities. Indeed, rather than offering any sorts of tax incentives, the government even announced an *export duty* of 20 to 28% on all printed matter.<sup>11</sup>

State publishers and distributors had special problems as a result of new economic realities. State enterprises depended on a woefully inadequate banking system. Interbank payments in Russia involved moving millions of pieces of paper around the country for manual processing. At best, such operations took an average of two months to perform—*inflation* eating away at the money’s value all the while, and at worst, *trillions* of rubles went unaccounted for over long periods of time.<sup>12</sup>

In a related development, a payment crisis produced mountains of mutual debt for state enterprises. By November booksellers from all around the former Soviet Union owed Moscow’s Central Wholesale Book Base 1.8 billion rubles, while the base in turn owed publishers a total of 1.3 billion.<sup>13</sup> The State Bank’s practice of issuing an endless supply of credits to debt-ridden enterprises then had the paradoxical effect of actively encouraging state publishers not even to try to sell existing stockpiles of books.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, even when and if state enterprises—either publishers or distributors—wished to produce or sell books, they were hampered by their inability to expedite matters by offering bribes, since their budgets did not and could not contain funds earmarked for such a purpose. Only private structures could easily free up funds for under-the-table payments. And no successful business in Russia in 1992 could operate without handing out cash bribes right and left.

5 Ivan Pokhorov, “Dlya optimizma poka malo osnovanii,” *Knizhnoe delo*, no. 2 (1992): 17.

6 A. I. Solov'yev, “Plyuralizm sovremennoy knizhnoy kul’tury,” *Kniga. Issledovaniya i materialy*, vol. 60 (1990): 7.

7 Yury Maysuradze, “Perekrestki privatizatsii,” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 42 (1992): 6.

8 For reports on various fairs—the most important of them held at Nizhny Novgorod—see *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 38 (1992): 7; no. 45 (1992): 5. In Moscow a large wholesale book market operated twice a week at the Olympic Sports Complex. As for the street trade, Nikolay Popov, “Ved’mu, ‘gulliver’ i prochie slozhnosti,” *Stolitsa*, no. 44 (1992): 39-40, offers an eye-opening account of a day’s work at one of Moscow’s ubiquitous bookstands.

9 For details, see “Marat Shingin,” *Knizhnoe delo*, no. 2 (1992): 3.

10 “Obrashchenie izdateley k Prezidentam,” *Knizhnoe delo*, no. 1 (1992): 9.

11 “Khot’ by eto deystviteley no byla oshibka!”, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 36 (1992): 3.

12 “Chaotic Banking System Mislays Trillions of Rubles,” *Moscow Times*, 13 Nov. 1992: 11.

13 Yury Maysuradze, “Otdayte den’gi!”, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 46 (1992): 2.

14 For details on the disincentives that government policies in fact provided for state enterprises, see “Russia Reborn,” a survey of Russia published as an insert in *The Economist*, 5 Dec. 1992: 10-19.

## The Legal Environment

In addition to economic factors, Russia's legal environment also had a profound impact on the book business. The implosion of the USSR left a vacuum that contributed greatly to a widely shared perception of lawlessness (*bezzakonie*). One of the few praiseworthy consequences of the anarchic state of affairs was the virtually complete disappearance of censorship. Eduard Limonov's sexually explicit *Eto ya, Edichka* (It's Me, Eddie) provided the test case. Because no Russian printer would touch the project, the publisher arranged to have the book printed in Latvia—under police protection. The book was subsequently sold openly in Russia, where some 500,000 copies were bought.<sup>15</sup> After that no publisher worried any longer about censorship of the printed word.

Most other aspects of Russia's legal chaos could evoke only dismay in most quarters, at least in the outside world. In particular, the lack of adequate copyright protection led to piracy on a monumental scale. The most notorious case involved the Russian translation of Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett*. At least nine different pirated editions of the novel forced the publishing house Khudozhestvennaya literatura to abandon its plans to issue a translation for which it had actually purchased the rights.<sup>16</sup>

The Russian government took some halting steps to remove the stain on Russia's international image that piracy represented. VAAP, the All-Union Agency for Copyrights, was recast as RAIS, the Russian Agency for Intellectual Property. VAAP had functioned as a monopolistic government agency charged with defending the interests of Soviet writers abroad, but the agency's unofficial responsibilities included funneling as much hard currency as possible into government coffers, preventing the publication abroad of "undesirable" (i.e., dissident) literature, and gathering intelligence for the KGB.<sup>17</sup> The staff of RAIS promised to abandon VAAP's nasty ways, but many of the people I

interviewed voiced considerable skepticism over this proffered metamorphosis. "It's the same old office and the same old faces," I was told again and again.

Some publishers saw it as in their best interests to work for the adoption of a law on intellectual property in Russia. The absence of such legislation made planning difficult and also deprived publishers of the opportunity to sell subsidiary rights, a major source of income for publishers outside Russia.<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of the year two separate committees of the Russian parliament were considering two different copyright bills, but Russia began the year 1993 still without a copyright law. Probably too many organizations and structures had a vested interest in piracy, particularly of the video variety.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many commentators questioned the very enforceability of a copyright law.

Doubts about the efficacy of a law on intellectual property grew out of an awareness of Russia's lack of any orthodox business culture. The role of bribes has already been mentioned. "Good faith" remained a largely alien concept: a lack of contractual discipline dominated business dealings and practice. Printers in effect sometimes stole clients' runs.<sup>20</sup> *Knizhnoe obozrenie* reported thousands of complaints from consumers who subscribed to books series, paid in advance, and were left in the end without either books or money. To sum up the situation, in 1992 Russia offered a business climate that even Russians themselves openly characterized as "uncivilized."

Another factor influencing book publishing in 1992 was the traditional Soviet problem of acquiring reliable information. Publishers had extraordinary difficulty ascertaining each other's plans. Announced publications often failed to materialize, and in order to protect themselves against eventual charges of piracy, many publishers in fact chose not to make their current production and future plans a matter of public record.<sup>21</sup> Partly as a consequence of so much operating in the dark, competing pub-

15 See "Avoiding a New Samizdat," *Moscow Guardian*, 25 June 1992: 14.

16 See "Book pirates, frankly, don't give a damn," *Moscow Times*, 5 June 1992: 16.

17 See "VAAP-GAASP-RAIS: staraya struktura—novoe soderzhanie," *Knizhnoe delo*, no. 2 (1992): 19-21.

18 See, for instance, the appeal by the Civilized Publishers against Piracy, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 44 (1992): 2.

19 On "mafia" structures opposed to the adoption of copyright legislation, see "Opyat' postradala Bernskaya konvensiya," *Kommersant-Daily*, no. 18 (29 October 1992): 13; on video piracy in Russia, estimated at 70 million dollars for 1991 alone, see "The Unbearable Lightness of Capitalism," *The Economist*, 17 Oct. 1992: 75.

20 See, for instance, Ida Sukhar, "Budushchee—za chastnymi izdatel'stvami," *Knizhnoe delo*, no. 2 (1992): 18.

21 According to Mikhail Levner, Moscow purchasing agent for the Library of Congress, many alternative publishers did not send the required control copies of their output to either Knizhnaya palata or the Russian National Library. As a consequence, bibliographical records published by Knizhnaya palata for recent years cannot be considered complete or even nearly so. Levner asserted that by the end of 1992 the network of libraries of the Russian Academy of Sciences represented the best source of bibliographical information about Russian publications, but even

lishing entities often duplicated titles, in large runs, to everyone's disadvantage.

The economic, legal, and cultural developments outlined above affected the book market in Russia—and therefore book publishing—in a number of specific ways. To begin with, the year 1992 saw the end of the book boom that had started in the early 1970s. Book production in Russia had in fact been declining since 1986, but all kinds of indicators show that book production at midyear was down from the previous year by about 40%.<sup>22</sup> For the first six months of the year no state publisher released more than 10% of the announced titles for the year.<sup>23</sup> True, toward the end of the year the picture brightened somewhat: for the third quarter book production rose two-fold.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, no one claimed that this bit of light came from the end of any tunnel.

People in the book business maintained that in 1992 publishing became a much less profitable venture than had been the case just a few years earlier. There was still money to be made in book publishing, but the director of Polifact Ltd., for instance, observed that while in 1990 the profit margin on his firm's books averaged over 100%, in 1992 the corresponding figure fell to around 20%.<sup>25</sup> The year's price increases and inflation took their toll, and more than ever people in all areas of the book business concentrated on a quick turnover and short-term profits.

## Distribution and the Marketplace

The new market conditions led to specific problems with book distribution. State-run distributors and wholesalers possessed the infrastructure and experience necessary for nation(s)-wide coverage but functioned more and more sluggishly as the year progressed. The more efficient alternative distributors had their shortcomings, too, generally

confining their operations to a small area, often a single city. In that way they contributed to the regionalization and smaller press runs that characterized the Russian book market in 1992.<sup>26</sup>

Generally speaking, alternative distributors handled only mass-market titles. State wholesalers also began altering their profiles in the direction of the mass market. In the end, because of a new awareness of the pivotal role played by sales and distribution, publishers of all stripes began tailoring their output to meet the demands of the market as interpreted and/or determined by distributors.<sup>27</sup> The old world of Soviet book publishing was thus stood on its head. In the pre-Gorbachev years editors based publishing decisions not on sales potential, but on signals from "above," especially from various state committees. In 1992 editors and publishers were still obliged to heed signals, but now from "below," that is, from distributors.

Publishing houses adopted a number of strategies for coping in the new marketplace. State publishing houses tried to become leaner and meaner, cutting their staffs by half or even more. (Several published reports suggested that reductions in staff often began with the most qualified personnel and were intended to strengthen the position of *nomenklatura* types.<sup>28</sup>) Other strategies for coping included publishing reprints, seeking sponsors and subsidies, and accepting outside orders. With regard to the latter option, American religious groups, mostly fundamentalist, spent 1992 in Russia saving publishers along with souls. Generally speaking, however, the state houses fought a losing battle, steadily losing ground to alternative presses. By year's end the latter were publishing one-fourth of all the books produced in Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Given the new rules of the Russian book market, virtually everyone recognized the potential importance of marketing and advertising. Most state publishers created marketing divisions, and editors at

22 that potential data base fell far short of completeness.

23 Yury Maysuradze, "Devyat' mifov rossiiskogo knigoizdaniya," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 34 (1992): 6.

24 "Rost Isen—ugroza chteniyu," *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 35 (1992): 8.

25 Maysuradze, "Otday den' gil'": 2.

26 "Dialog pessimista i optimista," *Vek*, no. 15 (1992): 7.

27 Many books were not circulated outside the city in which they were published. A prime example of such extreme regionalization was the Tolstoy series announced by Terra in November 1992. Subscribers to the series had to sign up for it *in person* at one of six designated locations in Moscow and in Moscow only. As individual volumes became available they were to be picked up in person, and again only in Moscow. Moscow, by the way, was the source of some 70% of all the books published in Russia in 1992.

28 There was room for sophisticated market manipulation here, since distributors realized they could guarantee a title a certain popularity simply by choosing to carry it. Street sellers also knew that one way to increase sales for a specific title was to *raise* the asking price, thus making the book look like a hot item. See Popov, *op. cit.*

29 See, for instance, Yury Kublanovsky, "Kto zhe gubit russkuyu knigu?", *Moskovsky komsomolets*, 17 Nov. 1992: 2; Konstantin Vanshenkin, "Zhadnost' fraera sgubila," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 9 Sept. 1992: 7.

29 Maysuradze, "Perekrestki privatizatsii": 6.

such houses found themselves in a new and alien world of market and financial projections. Because of the combination of inflation and limited information, such projections frequently resembled alchemy with an admixture of astrology. In the absence of sales figures and other essential indicators, editors made publishing decisions on the basis of intuition, instinct, inspiration, and probably panic.

Advertising remained in an embryonic state, but some publishers, especially alternative presses, showed themselves capable of orchestrating effective publicity campaigns. Special events of various kinds (the ubiquitous *presentatsii*) often accompanied new releases, and canny publishers arranged for newspapers and magazines to carry items that melded reportage and advertising. As with almost all Russian advertising in 1992, however, book advertisements rarely addressed themselves to individual consumers, who in any case would probably have looked in vain for highly publicized books. Instead, advertising addressed itself to the all-important distribution and wholesale structures.

In deciding what titles to issue, the vast majority of publishers gave in to the temptation to minimize risks by offering books that distributors would be eager to handle. As a result, 1992 went down as a lean year—many would say a year of famine—for contemporary Russian poetry and prose, Russian classics, scientific and scholarly monographs,<sup>30</sup> literary and art criticism. To cite perhaps the most extreme example, the publishing house Sovremennoy pisatel' (formerly Sovetsky pisatel'), until recently the most important Soviet publisher of contemporary Russian writing, discarded over 250 titles from its announced program for 1992.<sup>31</sup> Other frantic publishers, albeit in less dramatic quantities, also annulled, tore up, or otherwise violated existing agreements.

Most—but not all—Russian publishers in 1992 tailored their production to suit a broad audience,

with little regard for gender, age, or other factors that might influence reading tastes. The desire to make a “quick killing” in the mass market inclined Russian publishers in 1992 to detective fiction (by far the most popular genre in Russia in the last few years), science fiction, historical novels, children’s literature, religious tracts, and reference works of all sorts.<sup>32</sup> Almost all the detective novels, thrillers, and science fiction were translated (and pirated to boot), as was a great deal of the historical fiction. The predominance of the literature of entertainment in translation reminded literary scholars of the Russian book market of the 1920s.<sup>33</sup>

Not all publishers targeted their production at an indiscriminate mass audience. Some demonstrated an awareness of potential market segmentation and adopted corresponding strategies. Capitalizing on the emergence of a new Russian elite prone to conspicuous consumption, a few publishers took the notion of the book as a commodity to an extreme. Producing expensive limited editions, such publishers frankly advertised their wares as good “investments” and “hedges against inflation.”<sup>34</sup>

Publishers in 1992 discovered women as a potential audience. Raduga Publishers, in conjunction with Harlequin, introduced the Russian public to the Harlequin romance.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the year other publishers were attempting to appeal to women readers. More romances appeared—not all of them from Harlequin, and the publishing house Hermes announced a multi-volume series entitled “Library of Romantic Novels.”<sup>36</sup>

At least one Russian publisher in 1992 voiced an interest in tapping the Russian audience for homoerotic theatics. Alexander Shatalov, senior editor for Glagol, announced plans for a complete edition of Yevgeny Kharitonov's works as well as for a translation of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*.<sup>37</sup> As of the end of the year, however, only Baldwin's novel had appeared.

30 In 1992 runs for scholarly and scientific books averaged 500-1000 copies, and by the end of the year the production cost per copy fell somewhere between 500 and 1000 rubles. Hence the catastrophic state of scholarly publishing. For more on this area, see “Pozhertvovaniya,” *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 48 (1992): 4.

31 “Chto proiskhodit v ‘Sovetskoye pisatel’,” *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 33 (1992): 7.

32 This listing is based on the “Signal’nye ekzemplary” section of *Knizhnoe obozrenie* and on interviews with researchers at Moscow’s Institut knigi.

33 See M. Zolotonosov, “Lyubov’ k appenditsitu,” *Moskovskie novosti*, no. 22 (1992): 22.

34 Examples of such elite volumes include François Villon, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Prosvesh, 1992), with a total run of 55 copies, 500 of them numbered and signed.

35 See “Lyubovny roman ‘Arlekina’ i ‘Radugi’,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 7 July 1992: 9.

36 See *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, no. 24 (1992): 1. Predictably but sadly, some publishers of “books for women” view their intended audience with undisguised condescension. Two senior editors (male) at one publishing house told me frankly that they wanted to publish popular entertainment for women in order to keep otherwise disgruntled wives occupied and home “where they belonged.”

37 “Avoiding a New Samizdat”: 14.

A precious few publishers concentrated on the potential market for what Western booksellers would classify as "quality literature." Houses like Glagol, Tekst, Terra, Gnosis, Russlit, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, Carte blanche, and Start gave the lie to the frequently heard lament that no one was offering Russian and world classics or serious contemporary writing. Distributors generally shied away from such volumes, however, so buyers had a very difficult time actually tracking them down.<sup>38</sup>

The emergence of a market mentality in the book business, the redefinition of the book as a *commodity*, as a cultural *product*, of course had consequences for Russian society and culture. The readings of those consequences varied widely, however. Depending on which observers one gave credence to, Russian culture in 1992 turned out to be undergoing commercialization,<sup>39</sup> visualization, Americanization, Latinoamericanization, a mortal illness, or a renaissance. The most popular buzz word among culturologists, beyond question, was "postmodernism." But as so often has been the case in the history of Russia's cultural evolution, Western terminology and concepts at best offered proximate and partial descriptions of a complex and contradictory process without a true Western analogue.

## The Demise of Russian Culture?

Certain aspects of the cultural scene and the discussion of it nonetheless stood out in sharp relief. Pleas on behalf of Russian culture required scrupulous examination. Laments over the perceived demise of Russian culture under the onslaught of the market often betrayed ignorance of the fact that "Russian culture" represented a construct, a mutable concept, a plexus of values, ideas, subjects, and objects in a state of constant redefinition. In other instances, as the critic Sergey Chuprinin pointed out, hand-wringing over the current state of culture revealed a clear case of

amnesia: people had already forgotten what Brezhnevite Russian culture looked and sounded like.<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, Yury Nagibin took issue with those who espied the death of high culture in Russia. There was plenty of good music, literature, and theater for anyone who took the time to seek them out, the writer maintained. It was not that culture was dead; rather, people were dead to it.<sup>41</sup>

Allegedly disinterested concern for the well-being of Russia's vaunted "spiritual culture" sometimes masked thoroughly crass, if quite understandable, motives. Most often they centered around fear of loss of position, prestige, and livelihood, especially for the intelligentsia. The intelligentsia's alarm was well-founded, because in the end one of the few things that could be said with absolutely certainty about Russian culture in 1992 was that the first year of the postcommunist era brought with it the abrupt displacement and rude marginalization of the Russian intelligentsia and its culture. And since the intelligentsia largely identified itself with the printed word—especially with books—the commercialization of book publishing greatly aggravated the intelligentsia's sense of having been ill-used and abandoned.<sup>42</sup>

Within the intelligentsia the group to suffer the greatest displacement as a result of the new market conditions in the book world was, of course, writers. As late as 1991 the Union of Soviet Writers had boasted some 5000 members in the RSFSR alone, and virtually all of them supported themselves through their writing. With the arrival of 1992 and the book market's almost complete indifference to contemporary Russian writing, the overwhelming majority of writers found themselves without a means of livelihood. Not surprisingly, they complained eloquently, often, and at length.<sup>43</sup> Only fellow writers—and not even all of them—listened with much sympathy. In one of the most stunning and remarkable cultural reversals in the new Russia, the combination of government non-interference in the cultural sphere and a move to a market

38 In an attempt to provide an outlet for quality books, the publishing house Carte blanche opened 19 oktyabrya, a "literary salon" in Moscow that carried the contemporary fiction and poetry that mass-market distributors would not handle.

39 In confirmation of the institutionalized commercialization of Russian culture, a 150-page report authored by Yevgeny Sidorov, Russia's Minister of Culture, singled out "the role of mass commercial culture in a democratic society and a state recognizing the rule of law." See "Nuzhna li pomosch' Marianne?", *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 11 Dec. 1992: 7.

40 Sergey Chuprinin, "Koe-chto o zabyvchivosti," *Stolitsa*, no. 44 (1992): 49-50.

41 Yury Nagibin, "Vremya velikikh peremen," *Literaturnye novosti*, no. 13 (1992): 2-3.

42 Sergey Zalygin's short story "Kak-nibud'" (*Novyj mir*, no. 4 [1992]: 121-137) captured perfectly the shell-shocked mood of the elder generation of the intelligentsia; Alexander Genis' essay "Sovok" (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 Sept. 1992: 8) delivered a *coup de grâce* to the intelligentsia by reducing it to the status of a pampered and ultimately useless creation of the Soviet regime.

43 For representative catalogues of woes, see Anatoly Makarov, "Muzy bez nadzora," *Kul'tura*, 15 Aug. 1992: 8; Vladimir Lakshin, "Novye sovety iz-za okeana," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 21 (1992): 3; Natalya Ivanova, "Bog dal mne pero...," *Stolitsa*, no. 5 (1992): 56-57.

economy in publishing toppled writers from the lofty status of cultural icon that they had enjoyed (and suffered for) for at least a century and a half.<sup>44</sup> A number of factors accounted for writers' natural fall from unnatural grace and their sense that Russian literature had come to an end.<sup>45</sup> The favors that writers had received from the Soviet regime did not win them any friends in the postcommunist era. More importantly, writers undermined their own position by conducting a prolonged, ugly civil war and asking for the equivalent of handouts. The on-going struggle between the two factions of the former Union of Soviet Writers involved important matters of principle, pitting fascists against antifascists, but to outsiders the warfare between the conservative, nationalistic, "patriotic" Union of Writers of Russia (after June 1992 renamed the International Commonwealth of Writers' Unions) and the liberal, "democratic" Union of Russian Writers (after June renamed the Commonwealth of Writers) unfortunately looked like a petty squabble over property.<sup>46</sup> Small wonder, then, that writers' appeals for government support of book publishing, and therefore of themselves, met with verbal sneers.<sup>47</sup> In the end, writers so compromised themselves that as Sergey Mikhalkov noted: "I'm worried about the fact that many writers are living literally from hand to mouth... and nobody cares."<sup>48</sup>

Only two groups of writers could in fact get by on their literary earnings in Russia in 1992. The first, a handful of people—comprised Russian writers who earned royalties or fees in the form of hard currency.<sup>49</sup> The second category, a much larger group, was literary translators, for whom the rampant piracy of 1992 made the year a happy time. Formerly a kind of "untouchable" caste among literati, translators now thrived in a marketplace that put a premium on non-Russian works.

## The Future of Book Publishing in Russia

As the year 1992 drew to a close, many questions that would affect the future of book publishing remained unanswered or unresolved. Russia still lacked a copyright law and thus remained an international pariah. However, when a copyright law is finally adopted, its initial effect may well be to depress the Russian book industry, for piracy served as a powerful stimulus for publishing in 1992 and helped keep the book business alive.

Another basic issue was privatization and the question of which structures would survive—state publishers and distributors or those entities in more or less private hands. With regard to the proposed massive privatization of state properties and enterprises, government documents and actions made it unclear whether all state publishing houses were subject to privatization.<sup>50</sup>

Allied to the issue of privatization is the question of state support of the book industry. Without such help state-run structures are probably doomed, but despite pleas for assistance, the Russian government demonstrated little willingness in 1992 to grant culture in general and book publishing in particular any special status. However, the Office of Publishing and Book Distribution in the Russian Ministry of Print and Mass Information proposed a federal program for 1993-96 to support book publishing, especially in the areas of textbooks, children's literature, poetry and fiction, scientific and scholarly literature, reference works, literature in languages of Russia other than Russian, and books on art.<sup>51</sup> Whether the program has any real chance of being implemented is anyone's guess.

As noted in the proposed federal program, textbooks made for an area of special concern for the future. The collapse of the USSR instantly rendered almost all existing school textbooks obsolete and even seditious. Declining book production in gen-

44 For an account of similar developments in former East Germany, see Katie Hafner, "A Nation of Readers Dumps Its Writers," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 20, 1992: 26-26, 46, 48.

45 Mikhail Berg, "Korol' umer," *Stolitsa*, no. 48 (1992): 54-56, expounds the often-heard thesis that Russian literature as we have known it, that is, as a moral force opposing the Russian government, died with the unsuccessful putsch of August 1991.

46 On the venomous tone that writers adopted toward each other in print, see Sergey Chuprinin, "Peyzazh mezdu bitvami," *Stolitsa*, no. 48 (1992): 57-58.

47 Early in the year the Russian PEN-Center addressed precisely such an appeal to Yeltsin. For representative examples of outraged reactions, see Alexander Ivanov, "Literature nichko ne ugrozaet," *Literaturnye novosti*, no. 6 (1992): 5; Nikolay Klimentovich, "Raspredelenie gonorara," *Moskovskie novosti*, no. 28 (12 July 1992): 23.

48 "Chto vas osobenno zabit?" *Vecherny klub*, 29 Sept. 1992: 4.

49 Sergey Chuprinin, "Lyudi gibnut," *Stolitsa*, no. 26 (1992): 53-55, accuses writers of chasing dollars shamelessly.

50 See Maysuradze, "Perekrestki privatizatsii": 6.

51 For details, see "Bor'ba za knigu po vsemu frontu," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 Nov. 1992: 7.

eral and problems at the main textbook publisher, Prosveshchenie, aggravated an already critical situation. As a consequence, millions of copies of textbooks were imported.<sup>52</sup> Demonstrating remarkable benevolence and great farsightedness, the Soros Foundation stepped in to help out by announcing a multimillion-dollar competition for innovative new textbooks for Russia. By the end of 1992 the foundation had awarded the first grants, and the project was well under way.<sup>53</sup> The swiftness with which the Soros project realized its initial plans argued eloquently in favor of taking responsibility for textbooks away from the state, but it remains to be seen just how soon the books underwritten by Soros will actually roll off the presses.

The single most important question for the future of the book business in Russia revolves around whether publishing and distribution structures can somehow tap the rich potential of the Russian market, so that bookstores in remote Siberian cities could carry a wide range of titles and additionally offer customers the chance to place special orders. That kind of market diversity will remain a dream until political and economic stability return to the country, allowing people in the book business to think about the long term. Then publishers and distributors will need to unlearn the Soviet habit of enormous runs of a few titles and aim for diversity through more modest runs of larger numbers of titles. Such a Western-style publishing strategy will

in turn require new and more efficient printing equipment. Finally, if specialized presses, especially academic publishers, hope to survive in the new Russian marketplace, they will have to find a way to keep books available for longer than the two or three months typical for today's offerings. In short, they will have to adopt a practice for which no adequate Russian terminology even exists—"keeping books in print."

None of the conditions mentioned above will arise very soon. Until then, the book business in Russia will probably continue to look much as it did in 1992, characterized by extremely regionalized markets in which publishers limit themselves, by and large, to risk-free mass-market titles. And depending on their profession, tastes, and income, Russian citizens will continue to find the resulting cornucopia of expensive detective novels, works of science fiction, historical novels, and "how-to" manuals either symptoms of a terrible crisis or cause for considerable elation.

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52 "Germaniya prislala Rossii uchebniki algebry," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, no. 163 (26 Aug. 1992): 1.

53 For details, see the announcement in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 31 (20 July 1992): 7.

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